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MAKING WAVES: THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF BLACK FEMINISM

by Ula Y. Taylor

ON OCTOBER 25, 1997, more than 500,000 black women converged on the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia, to celebrate an enduring sisterhood. In a gathering patterned after the Million Man March organized by Minister Louis Farrakhan, many of the women in attendance were looking to affirm their feminine power.¹ But a feminine body does not always possess a feminist consciousness. In fact, many contemporary black women are ambivalent about identifying themselves as feminists, though most celebrate historical black feminist traditions. Whether it be the texts of nineteenth-century writer Anna J. Cooper, the pathbreaking work of Audre Lorde, or the oral traditions of blues singers like Bessie Smith or rap artist Queen Latifah, many black women acknowledge these contributions to African American life without embracing their feminist meanings.

It seems that far too many black people continue to link the feminist movement exclusively to the activism of bourgeois white women and not to the struggles initiated by African Americans for freedom, justice, and equality. Despite this popular misconception, the fact is that the history of feminism in the United States is marked by two distinct periods or waves that are directly connected to, and outgrowths of, two key movements in African American history: the abolitionist movement (which culminated with the suffragists' securing passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920) and the modern civil rights movement (which peaked with the enforcement, during the 1970s, of Title VII

and Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964). During both of these monumental historical periods and the third wave that followed them, countless numbers of black women activists developed a distinctly feminist consciousness that gave them an agency to strive for empowerment on their own terms. Collectively, their feminism was more expansive than the agenda put forth by white women, in that specific social, economic, and political issues facing African American communities were incorporated into a theoretical paradigm that today we call black feminism.

IN THIS ESSAY I SEEK TO IDENTIFY some of the crucial elements of black feminist theory that surface in the scholarship and activism of black women during the tail end of the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, and on the eve of the third wave in the 1980s and 1990s. I pay close attention to the fact that when African American women advocate black feminism, their discourse recognizes how systems of power are configured around maintaining socially constructed categories of both race and gender. And, since economic difference is the main determinant producing variations in their lives, black feminists attack racism, sexism, and poverty simultaneously. The ultimate goal of black feminism is to create a political movement that not only struggles against exploitative capitalism and what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham calls the "racialized construction of sexuality," but that also seeks to develop institutions to protect what the dominant culture has little respect and value for — black

women's minds and bodies.²

Unfortunately, black feminists' efforts to shape their own destiny are too often marginalized and/or interpreted as divisive by others. Throughout this essay, I present examples attesting to the tensions black feminists experience with both black men and white society at large, as a means to engage in a dialogue on difficult issues that will not change until we confront and transform reactionary thinking and problematic behavior. Most significantly, though, this essay affirms what is essential to contemporary black feminism: a recognition of the importance of theory as a means of stimulating a particular mode of action and an understanding that "all discrimination is eventually the same thing — anti-humanism," an observation made by Shirley Chisholm in 1971 that still holds true today.³

Black Feminism and the Second Wave

SHIRLEY CHISHOLM PROVIDES the perfect introduction into an examination on how during feminism's second wave, black women strove to construct strategies for power and liberation but often became isolated from both black male and white female activists. Chisholm ran for president of the United States in 1972. Her candidacy was not well supported by white feminist groups, and the National Women's Political Caucus did not endorse her as their candidate. Even more surprising to her was the lack of respect and support she received from black men in mainstream politics. They branded her a "captive" of the women's movement and "hinted that [she] would sell out black interests if they came in conflict with those of women."⁴ This statement not only shamelessly implies that race is inherently gendered as male but also constructs Chisholm as a possible race traitor if she dared to critique gender politics.

This same group of men also chastised Chisholm for publicly supporting Angela Davis, who was the first black woman on FBI's Ten Most Wanted List in connection with an alleged conspiracy to free political prisoner James McClain. Chisholm later recalled that she "had gone to my brothers

in Congress and in leadership positions elsewhere and asked them to join me [in supporting Angela Davis], and they told me they could not because it was not politically expedient for them."⁵ Some feminist groups were also resistant to supporting Davis. Frances Beal, New York City Coordinator of the Third World Women's Alliance stated that leaders of the National Organization of Women (NOW) angrily told her that "Angela Davis has nothing to do with women's liberation." Beal responded, "It has nothing to do with the kind of liberation you're talking about, but it has everything to do with the kind of liberation we're talking about."⁶ Black feminism is politically opposed to imperialism and racism, two components that fueled the ubiquitous witchhunt against Davis.

Chisholm, like many black feminists, was sandwiched between the politically conservative, self-serving rhetoric of both white women and black men. Neither faction embraced her, both accused her of having only a precarious allegiance to their group. Despite the fact that black women were active in church auxiliaries, sororities, and clubs, they were not organized as a political bloc. And while black women alone could never put Chisholm in the White House, it was clear that black women needed a national political organization.

IN AUGUST 1973, a cadre of African American women founded the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). Founder Margaret Sloan is quoted as saying, "We were just thirty little colored sisters calling ourselves a national organization," but after a single press conference the NBFO received hundreds of calls and letters from all over the country inquiring about how to join and form local chapters.⁷ Although African American women formed the NBFO because of sexism in the Black Power movement and racism in the women's liberation movement, a white feminist claimed in *Off Our Backs: A Women's News Journal* that black women were under "enormous pressure not to join the women's liberation movement," therefore, they formed the NBFO.⁸

The *Off Our Backs* reporter's statement indirectly points to the attraction for many

black women of an Afrocentric political model, despite its patriarchal core. E. Frances White brilliantly points out the paucity of scholarship critiquing sexism in the black liberation struggle when compared to racism in the women's movement, citing evidence of how "Afrocentric ideology can be radical and progressive in relation to white racism and conservative and repressive in relation to the internal organization of the black community."⁹ But the same reporter's interpretation also dismissed the importance of the "rap sessions" organized by white women to discuss whether or not they should invite black women to participate at their conferences. At the Sandy Springs Conference (1968), for example, one white woman freely stated that "I have problems dealing with black people; I'm sure that everyone does." Her comrade agreed, "I think if we are really honest about it we don't want to work with black women."¹⁰

IN NOVEMBER, 1973, NBFO sponsored its first conference and over two hundred and fifty women attended. These women envisioned a multipurpose organization that would address an array of issues, including "employment, childcare, lesbianism, welfare, sexuality, media image, incarceration, addiction, and the relation of black women to one another and to the women's rights movement."¹¹ White women in attendance later wrote that their presence at the meeting clarified to them that "the coalitions we, as white women, want and need with black women will be hard coming unless we prove we're not racist."¹² During the first wave of feminism, black women had negotiated with racist white women, but the second wave required non-racist entry tickets that proved difficult for white women to produce. White women — and all men — were not admitted into the workshops but all had access to the large assembly.¹³

In the *Off Our Backs* special issue on the NBFO, white women pleaded their case that they were not all racist and motivated by greed. But in the same issue the section on "Cultures" advertises an underground comic book, *Girl Fight*, by Trina. The comic stars:

Fox, a black woman who stabs her sexist lover, meets the Feminist Underground Guerilla Unit who helps her to realize her forgotten identity (she's been suffering from amnesia) as a liberation fighter and turns her on to some sisterly love. Thus enlightened, Fox parachutes into the jungle, dresses in leopard skins, wrestles wild animals and exploitative politicians, meets her long-lost father and generally rights all wrongs. Even more exciting adventures occur in "She"; accounts of the Amazon brought into modern civilization. One of the most outstanding sequences shows the Amazon being prepped for her meeting with the President, ruler of the land. Stepping off the plane she spots the ruler/leader/holy one and rushes to pay homage to a very perplexed black woman with four children on her arms.

Every stereotype about African American women is supported by this one advertisement. The fact that this comic book was even advertised betrays an insensitivity on the part of the all-white staff of *Off Our Backs*. In her article on the NBFO, Fran Pollner states, "The feminist media is a vehicle for getting information out on what's happening to women and on what women are thinking, doing and planning. It benefits each and every one of us."¹⁴ This comic advertisement was clearly not beneficial to black women; on the contrary, it represented the degree to which popular culture is ingrained with racism and how the myths about black womanhood are commodified. The editors intended to publish a well-meaning article, but it is important to note how internalized racism impeded their judgement. Thus, it is not surprising that black women were distrustful of white women at the conference.

UNFORTUNATELY, after the conference the NBFO did not have a far-reaching impact, for two reasons: First, African American women had to deal with many issues in their lives and they were not able to generate a powerful political movement around a few issues, the way NOW could. Second, the "visual" membership of NOW and "women's libbers," combined with their agenda, confirmed to many African American women that anything associated with "feminism" was advantageous only to white women. Toni Morrison writes:

It is a source of amusement even now to black women to listen to feminists talk of liberation

while somebody's nice black grandmother shoulders the daily responsibility of child rearing and floor mopping and the liberated one comes home to examine the housekeeping, correct it, and be entertained by the children. If Women's Lib needs those grandmothers to thrive, it has a serious flaw."¹⁵

The majority of African American women did not have the choice, to be liberated from the "kitchen." The economic realities of most African American women dictated that they had to work outside the home. And, their underpaid, too often exploited labor power provided the means to "liberate" white women. Small clusters of black women continued to put pressure on NOW's leadership to shape its agenda to include issues important to "women of color" and poor white women, but overall, the participation of African American women in the women's liberation movement drastically decreased by 1975. By this time, the Black Power stage of the movement was also on the wane, due to the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program as well as internal dissension.

WHILE THERE WERE MANY PROBLEMS in revolutionary organizations like the Black Panther Party, they must be credited for forcing the federal government to move beyond the Voting Right's Act of 1965 to take affirmative steps to remove institutionalized racism. Institutionalized racism explained why discrimination continued to exist after Constitutional amendments and civil rights acts were passed. Herbert Haines avers that black radicals pushed the conservative Nixon administration to take "affirmative" steps to correct injustices.¹⁶ Affirmative action was a hodgepodge of policies aimed to reverse injustices against Americans who had suffered from past racial and sexual discrimination. Today, affirmative action is often represented by the media, academics, and conservative politicians as a program that gives "undeserving," "underqualified" African Americans an advantage over "deserving," "overqualified" white men.

A closer look at affirmative action after 1975, however, reveals that more white, formally educated women gained the "affirmative" edge than any other group.¹⁷ Prior to 1975, white feminists did not stress the

advantage of affirmative action in employment but instead focused on the ERA and "aggressive enforcement of Title IX of the education amendments of 1975, which pressured institutions to admit women in graduate and professional schools."¹⁸ By the late 1970s and early 1980s many white women were strategically positioned to benefit from affirmative action. Armed with professional degrees earned as a result of Title IX — white women no longer lacked formal higher education — the lack of which had formerly relegated them to typing pools. Affirmative action and Title VII combined are the legal bases for the third wave of feminism in the 1990s. Thus, it is not surprising that the leading black feminist theorists in the 1990s operate in the legal realm.

The Third Wave: The Rise of Black Feminist Jurisprudence and Black Women's Health Networks

THE THIRD WAVE OF FEMINISM is marked by the rise of a black feminist jurisprudence along with the formation of black women's health networks. The leading black feminist theorists today are also legal scholars. Patricia J. Williams in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, critiques legal theory in a fashion that has galvanized black feminist scholarship. Williams' work is on the cutting edge because her personal allegories, which touch on the multiple experiences of black women, challenge the traditional, technical form of legal discourse. Her work is reminiscent of Bruce Wright's *Black Robes White Justice* and Derrick Bell's *But Some of Us Are Saved* and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* in terms of unpacking the "metalanguage of race" and jurisprudence.¹⁹ But unlike Bell and Wright, Williams experiences her legal and daily life as a black woman. She understands that outsiders are making assumptions and reacting to her as a black woman, first and foremost. And while her academic degrees give her an economic advantage over her working class sisters, they do not fully position her outside the negative assumptions that are clothed in the myths and images that cloud the being of all black women.

WILLIAMS EXPLORES THE COMPLEX NATURE of legal cases to expose the interconnectedness of laws, race, gender, and class. Throughout the *Alchemy of Race and Rights*, Williams eloquently transforms legal theory by contextualizing her personal experiences with colorful prose. Her autobiographical style and language reminds one of the best black women writers — Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan and Audre Lorde. Many noted black women writers were political activists in the movement and participated in consciousness-raising liberation groups. They have transformed the “individual” and collectively given black women tangible, multiple voices of inspiration and hope and the strategies and tactics to change their conditions. Williams is one of many black feminist legal scholars who incorporates the literary style of black women writers to develop a black feminist jurisprudence. The fact that her work is available to the general public, as a book, makes it accessible outside the legal realm. However, the numerous articles by other black feminist legal scholars are just as important. Legal theory, published in law journals, shapes both the way law is practiced in the courtroom, and the making of public policy.

Paulette M. Caldwell is another black woman legal scholar committed to demystifying legal issues that are unique to black women. In an essay critiquing the case of Renee Rogers, an American Airlines employee who was prohibited from wearing her hair in a braided style, Caldwell states, “Whether motivated by politics, ethnic pride, health, or vanity, I was outraged by the idea that an employer could regulate or force me to explain something as personal and private as the way that I groom my hair.”²⁰

THE AIRLINE INDUSTRY has an infamous history of discriminating against women and especially African American women. On the surface, the airlines claim that their regulations lie in the realm of “image control” but the fact that a 1969 employment application notes that a “black woman was not hired as a flight attendant because she was too ugly and had big lips” attests to the airlines’ “real concern.”²¹ Caldwell, who also wears braids from time to

time, argues that Rogers’ is “a classic example of a case concerning the physical image of black women.”²² The implication that Rogers’ hairstyle was “unbusinesslike” also “delegitimized” Caldwell in her profession.

Caldwell, like Williams, reaches into the rich tradition of black women writers and states that “the writings of black women confirm the centrality of hair in the psychological abuse of black women.”²³ Wearing braids and other natural styles has cost black women promotions and media jobs. These conditions substantiate that hair is not a frivolous issue for black women.

Caldwell argues that too many cases concerning “black women’s issues slip through the cracks of legal protection.”²⁴ She points out that Title VII did not create a subcategory for “black women.” Therefore, it is extremely difficult for black women to win cases in which white women or black men have been hired or received promotions. Caldwell purports that “the failure to consider the implications of race-sex” cannot be explained by the development of separate (women’s and civil rights) movements. Rather, the “failure arises from the inability of political activists, policy makers, and legal theorists to grapple with the existence and political functions of the complex myths, negative images and stereotypes regarding black womanhood.”²⁵ The devaluation of black womanhood helps to explain why the majority of black women who sued employers for sexual harassment under the Title VII sex clause were defeated in court.²⁶

Legal scholar Regina Austin has given much thought to “the tenets that a black feminist or ‘womanish’ legal jurisprudence might pursue or embrace.”²⁷ Austin indicates that “a black feminist jurisprudence should preach the justness of the direct, participatory, grassroots opposition black women undertake despite enormous material and structural constraints.”²⁸ Austin’s scholarship exposes how black women are often subject to unfair treatment and blamed for most of societal ills.

AUSTIN ADDRESSES THE CASE of Crystal Chambers, who was fired from a Girls Club of Omaha because she became pregnant and was unmarried. Chambers’ Title

VII lawsuit “attacked the role model rule” and the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978. Austin states that:

[A] black feminist jurisprudential analysis of Chambers must seriously consider the possibility that young, single, sexually active, fertile, and nurturing black women are being viewed ominously because they have the temerity to attempt to break out of the rigid economic, social and political categories that a racist, sexist, and class-stratified society would impose upon them.²⁹

Austin observes that firing Chambers, a young woman in her early twenties, in “the name of protecting other young black females,” suggests that “the motherhood of unmarried adult black women” is linked to the “social problem” of teen pregnancy “if not causally responsible” for it.³⁰ Austin concludes by presenting Chambers as a black woman advocating feminism. Because Chambers refused to accept being fired for exercising her motherhood right, she “joined the host of non-elite black women who every day mount local, small scale resistance grounded in indigenous cultural values, values whose real political potential is often hidden even from those whose lives they govern.”³¹

Motherhood is currently an explosive topic in the United States. Elite, professional, white women are being told that their energies are urgently needed in the home, because children are not raised well without their guidance. On the other hand, as a result of recent drastic welfare cuts, poor women have no choice but to find underpaid service work outside the home. It is imperative at this time that we take a close look at which women are being encouraged to be mothers in this society and which women are being told that they do not have a right to stay at home and raise their children. The fact that the jaws of poverty will clench even tighter around already poor mothers, has not been a part of the discussion. Instead, the needs of poor women are dismissed as unimportant because, in the view of the dominant culture, they don’t matter and neither do their children. Crystal Chambers’ refusal to let the Girls Club manipulate her reproductive and productive capacities and Regina Austin’s black feminist analysis of that refusal, are micropolitical acts of defiance against this type of conserva-

tive thinking that reeks of paternalistic privilege, exploitative capitalism, and a failure to interrogate gender conflict.

BY THINKING POLITICALLY but writing and talking legally, these legal scholars have carved out an important niche in advocating a feminism that directly impacts the lives of black women. Also, because their language is allegorical and case-contextual, it is accessible (which is an important prerequisite for empowerment) to legal scholars, policy makers and grassroots activists alike.

Another important area of black feminist activism, on the eve of the third wave, is the formation of black women’s health networks. This marks an important step in black feminism in that, at last the physical and mental well being of black women takes precedence. Historically, African American women’s bodies have undergone objectification on many fronts. Whether it be the manipulation of the Jezebel myth to justify the rape and sexual harassment of black women, the treatment of black women as less-than-human breeders, or the forced sterilization of black women — the pornographic treatment of African American women’s bodies makes them prime targets for physical and mental abuse — and thus, for declining health.

IN THE TRADITION of African American women sharing remedies and healing herbs, Byllye Avery, the founding president of the National Black Women’s Health Project (NBWHP) also understood the need to create community based self-help programs. Avery conceptualized the formation of the NBWHP in 1978 after opening the Birthplace, an alternative birthing center in Gainesville, Florida. She writes “What we did first off was to come together as a group of black women to start talking about the realities of our lives.”³² But these women pushed the consciousness-raising strategies of the second wave to another level. They reasoned that “self-help groups” must “meet for life,” because “self-growth” is an “on-going process.”³³

In 1983 the NBWHP members organized a conference to break the “conspiracy of silence” around health issues. Avery points

out that “we must first learn to talk about sex” in order to “talk about birth control.” And if one cannot talk about birth control then “you won’t talk about abortion.”³⁴ Avery understands that black women’s health issues must be dealt with in a cultural context:

Culturally, we have participated in this silence that has been passed down through generations. A sister will tell you, “I’ve got to have surgery,” And you say, “What kind of surgery?” “Well, female surgery.” Well, you’re female from head to toe, what is the problem?³⁵

Over 2,000 women attended the conference and later formed self-health groups around issues that make them sick — obesity, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and drugs.

AS POLITICAL ACTIVISTS living in capitalist America, the members of NBWHP understood that it takes money to create institutions for change. In 1988 they received a million-dollar grant from the Kellogg Foundation to provide health care in three housing projects in Atlanta, Georgia.³⁶ Today, in Atlanta, the Center for Black Women’s Wellness at the Dunbar Community Center is a thriving unit. The Kellogg funds were used to establish health screening, which includes pap smears, breast exams, and tests for venereal diseases and the AIDS virus. The Center has also established programs that offer tutorial services for the GED and specialized certificates. Finally, “Walking for Wellness” is a program that encourages African Americans to live a healthy life-style.³⁷

Atlanta is not the only place where we see a concern for black women’s health. On 29 August 1987, Angela Davis gave an address before a conference organized by the North Carolina Black Women’s Health Project. Davis proclaimed that “the pursuit of health in body, mind and spirit weaves in and out of every major struggle women have ever waged in our quest for social, economic and political emancipation.”³⁸ Under capitalism, “health has been callously transformed into a commodity — a commodity that those with means are able to afford, but that is too often entirely beyond the reach of others.”³⁹ In 1991 black women in Wilmington, North Carolina, created the program “Save Our Sisters” to educate and “help older black women break the silence about breast cancer.”⁴⁰

STUDIES INDICATE that “between 1973-1988 deaths from breast cancer increased by 14% in black women compared to 1% in white women.” In addition, “37% of black women are likely to die within the first five years of being diagnosed with breast cancer compared to 22% among white women.”⁴¹ The difference in breast cancer survival rates is attributed to the fact that mammograms are expensive; thus, African American women have less frequent access to them and are diagnosed at a later stage of the disease.

Save Our Sisters, coordinated by Jackie Smith, “recruits” African American women who are respected in their local communities to promote the need for mammograms, especially for those over the age of 50. Smith credits the success of the program to the fact that “we are familiar faces within the community...because we are the friends, relatives, or even fellow church members, the women we talk to are comfortable discussing health issues like breast cancer with us.”⁴² The volunteers received their initial training from physicians and social workers at the University of North Carolina Comprehensive Cancer Center. Because the efforts of the first set of recruits were so successful, they now personally train new volunteers.

CURRENTLY, sixty advisors “provide social support, lay medical counseling, and organize breast cancer control activities.”⁴³ Most importantly, they make mammogram screenings readily available to African American women. In March, 1993, their two-day campaign, “Days of Our Lives,” placed a mobile mammography van at First Baptist Church and Hillcrest Housing Project, located near a seniors’ center. Over 100 African American women were screened. Finally, their “Adopt-a-Sister” program provides funding and transportation.

Currently, the media tends to portray the “crisis of the black male” as if black women were healthy and doing well.⁴⁴ But black women are particularly vulnerable to the most serious health crisis affecting Americans today — AIDS. The Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, reports that:

[T]oday 25% of all people with AIDS are black.
52% of all women with AIDS-related illness or posi-

tive HIV status are black. And 59% to 80% of all children afflicted with the virus are black. AIDS has become the leading cause of death for black women between the ages of 24 and 36. Moreover, black women who contract AIDS do not live as long or die as well as their white or male counterparts.⁴⁵

African American women are responding to the AIDS crisis in innovative ways. For example, in Columbia, South Carolina, Cosmetologist DiAna DiAna began by offering AIDS education and condoms to her clients. Now DiAna's mission to educate black women has evolved into a community-based, nonprofit organization – the South Carolina AIDS Education Network. This network differs from others because it operates out of a hair salon and “offers video screening, performances, and musical skits to get its message across to clients trapped beneath dryers and misinformation.”⁴⁶

BLACK WOMEN'S STRUGGLE not only to heal themselves but to remove the physical and psychological abuse from their lives requires the elimination of patriarchal relationships. Clearly, the most pressing danger posed by sexism in the black community is the violence it directs against women. There are basically two ways men prove their “manhood” under capitalism — economic earning power or physical strength. Few African American men are positioned to meet the repulsive “means test,” and the damaging consequence is the dominating or physical side of patriarchy. Evelyn C. White's *Chain Chain Change*, defines “abusive behavior” so that women can “identify exactly what is happening” to them. She explains that once a woman “understands how little shoves can lead to more serious injuries,” she will be more “likely to respond differently the next time” her “partner says he didn't mean to hurt you.”⁴⁷ African American women's willingness to sacrifice themselves for their community is a laudable tradition, but — at times — exploitative, if not fatal. White points out that “abused women have a tendency to put everyone's needs before their own.”⁴⁸ She offers practical suggestions to women deciding whether to stay with or to leave an abusive partner. Her work must be placed in the context of numerous African American women working on behalf of women to end violent attacks against them.

VIOLENCE IS USED as a means of control, and White points out that “even after the changes brought about by the recent women's movement, these attitudes and expectations about masculinity remain very strong.”⁴⁹ It does not help black women's pleas against abuse when a black woman, Shahrazad Ali, writes a book giving black men a “Guide to Understanding the Black Woman,” which reeks of misogyny.⁵⁰ Ali urges black women to submit to their men and embrace a sexist model of community where unequal power relations abound. bell hooks points out that Ali's book “is rooted in theories of patriarchy (for example, the sexist, essentialist belief that male domination of females is natural).”⁵¹ Thus, black feminists at times find themselves in direct opposition to other black women whose political agenda fails to include a critique of the sexist behavior that often manifests itself in masculine prerogatives. This tension confirms that there is not a single, monolithic black woman's standpoint, because too many variables (regional differences, skin tone, sexual orientation, age, and class, just to mention a few) divide and subdivide women.

POPULAR CULTURE REFLECTS the violent trend against African American women. Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*, which depicts the sexual life of Nola Darling, culminates in the rape of Darling. Felly Simmonds notes that the film “justifies rape as a legitimate tool that a man can use to punish a woman.”⁵² Similarly, most music videos objectify young women's bodies, and rap musicians' lyrics often advocate violent attacks on women in the name of “being hard-core rappers.” One of the most grotesque examples of a “hard-core” rapper internalizing and acting upon misogynistic thinking is the physical beating Andre Young/Dr. Dre gave to Dee Barnes, a young black woman who worked as a music talk show host. Young/Dre justified his brutality against Barnes by saying he was “upset” with his television segment on her show.⁵³ In response to this kind of violence and the negative portrayals of young black women in general, black feminists have organized to support Delores C. Tucker, a black woman who has

led the call to remove gangsta rap from the air-waves by holding the major distributor of this music, Time Warner, accountable. In addition, popular feminist writers like bell hooks have generated a prolific “cultural-critics” discourse to expose the harmful effects of the media’s lies and distortions concerning black women.

Because of the myths about African American womanhood rooted in slavery, it is presumed by many that African American women cannot be hurt or raped the way other women can. Society at large also contends that if a black woman is attacked, she can “handle it” because of her “super-human strength,” and she does not require support like other women. Black feminist activism debunks these insalubrious myths. And the creation of institutions that value black women — their bodies and their minds — is the epitome of what black feminism stands for on the eve of the third wave.

The Rise of Womanism

BUT AS WE ENTER THE THIRD WAVE of feminism and African American studies in the twenty-first century, more African American women are flatly rejecting a black feminist political identification. Without a doubt, the well-documented reactionary behavior on part of many white women has brought us to this juncture where the word “feminist” cannot be cleansed of its racist and elitist historical baggage. Yet, as African American women discard black feminism, many are adopting “womanism.”

Womanism, a term coined by Alice Walker, has four elements which first and foremost include “a Black feminist or feminist of color.” Second, is one who “appreciates and prefers women’s culture.” Third, is “love” of culture and “self.” Finally, the most routinized section of this quadruple expression is simply, “womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.”⁵⁴ Walker’s color-coded theoretical parallel is primarily useful as a literary device. Nonetheless, she provides a basis for other scholars to shape the concept for analysis by implying that “womanism has a greater scope” and “intensity” than black feminism.⁵⁵

Elsa Barkley Brown’s “Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke” serves as the archetype for a womanist analysis.⁵⁶ Barkley Brown details how Maggie Lena Walker’s theory and activism were not separate parts; they “are often synonymous, and it is only through her actions that we clearly hear her theory.”⁵⁷ For Barkley Brown, womanist theory fuses “race, sex, and class oppression as forming one struggle. Womanism flows from a both/and worldview, a consciousness that allows for the resolution of seeming contradictions not through an either/or negation but through the interaction and wholeness.”⁵⁸ Because womanism or womanish behavior is centered in a “holistic consciousness” it is not surprising that many African American women embrace this concept, and rightfully so.

DESPITE THE CONTENTION that womanism is more encompassing, black feminism and womanism would seem to be nearly interchangeable empowerment theories. Both avow the importance of grounding the activism of black women in their cultural heritage – a culture that overall does not encourage submissiveness or docility amongst its members. This cultural tradition provides a fertile ground for black women to resist oppression. Both theories encourage black women to value and love self, regardless of outsiders’ perceptions. (One of the most vicious weapons used by racists to exploit the labor power of, and to sexually abuse black women, has been to dehumanize and objectify them.) Lastly, both recognize black women’s serious, responsible commitment to creating a whole community void of dominance.

Despite the similarities between these paradigms, many womanists continue to disclaim black feminism. While it is important to acknowledge the current anti-feminist trend in the United States, we should ask whether there are other reasons womanists resist black feminism. Are womanists discarding feminism because of its connection to privileged, white, middle- and upper-class women, despite Audre Lorde’s statement that “Black feminism is not white feminism

in blackface.” Or, are womanist’s rejecting the presumed “anti-feminine” baggage of feminism? Or, is adopting a concept — womanism — named by a black woman, merely “politically correct”?

WOMANISM IS A SWEEPING theoretical construct, and black women tend to select the most attractive parts of the theory to meet their needs. The flexibility of the term suits the multiple voices of black women, but it also leaves room for the negative appropriation or the disposal of “unappealing” aspects of the theory. For example, early Religious Studies scholars who employed the theory, dismissed the possibility of its including a lesbian lifestyle. Thus a fertile ground for lesbian baiting may eventually thrive despite the fact that Walker’s definition incorporates women loving women, sexually and non-sexually. Black feminism, on the other hand, does not leave room for this type of dilution. The positionality of black lesbians in developing black feminist theory, especially in the 1980s, is irrevocable.

Both womanism and black feminism recognize a distinct women’s culture. It seems that womanism allows black women a “femininity” presumably denied under “feminism.” Prior to the modern civil rights movement, enslaved black women were written about by historians as if they were androgynous. Sojourner Truth’s feminism acknowledged that slavery denied black women “feminine” qualities, and in particular their right to be mothers. But by the second wave, white feminists located their oppression in “female” roles, and the “women’s libbers” connected exterior “female” attire (bras, high heel shoes) to their oppression. But for many black women, attire and the home were not the principal sites of their oppression. In fact, the denial of black women’s “femininity” has been the main vehicle used to exploit their labor power and womanhood.

WOMANISM’S broad theoretical makeup and emphasis on culture, implicitly rooted in black women’s varied experiences, can be interpreted as something distinctly “feminine” and therefore enticing for many black women. But will conservative women

like Phyllis Schlafly or Shahrazad Ali, in their effort to undermine the gains made by women advocating feminism, appropriate and manipulate elements of “womanism,” particularly women’s culture, and “women’s emotional flexibility” to serve their own reactionary political aims?

Black feminism has withstood the test of time and continues to be an impressive political paradigm. Holding on to this theory is a way of protecting a progressive political agenda. Despite the fact that womanism is nearly interchangeable with black feminism, it is a relatively new empowerment theory and has not undergone a critical examination by scholars. Black feminism may conjure up the racist history of white women, but it must also be identified with the glorious tradition of black female activists’ trenchant commitment to empowering themselves to create a humanistic community. It is because of this irrevocable fact that leading African American activists continue to embrace a feminist identity on the eve of the third wave.

Endnotes

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3. Shirley Chisholm, “Race, Revolution and Women,” *The Black Scholar*, December (1971) 21.
4. Shirley Chisholm, *The Good Fight* (New York: Harper and Row Pub., 1973) 34.
5. *Ibid.*, 33.
6. Charlayne Hunter, “Many Blacks Wary of Women’s Liberation Movement in U,” *New York Times* 17 November (1970) 60.
7. *Off Our Backs Women’s News Journal*, Washington D.C., December-January (1974) 2.
8. *Off Our Backs*, September (1973) 9.
9. E. Frances White, “Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse and African-American Nationalism” *Journal of Women’s History*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring (1990) 76-77.
10. Alice Echols, “Daring to be Bad,” 370 Appendix A: Discussion at Sandy Springs Conference, August (1968).
11. *Off Our Backs*, December-January (1974) 2.
12. *Ibid.*, 1.
13. *Ibid.*, 2.
14. Fran Pollner, *Off Our Backs*, December-January (1974) 3.
15. Toni Morrison, “What the Black Woman Thinks About Women’s Lib,” *New York Times Magazine*, 22 August (1971) 64.
16. Herbert Haines, *Black Radicals and the Civil Rights*

- Mainstream, 1954-1970* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1988).
17. Gerald Horne, *Reversing Discrimination: The Case for Affirmative Action* (New York: International Pub., 1992).
 18. *Ibid.*, 61.
 19. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs*, Winter (1992), 225: "Race serves as a global sign, a metalanguage, since it speaks about and lends meaning to a host of terms and expressions, to a myriad aspects of life that would otherwise fall outside the referential domain of race."
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 21. *Ibid.*, 390n82.
 22. *Ibid.*, 376.
 23. *Ibid.*, 391.
 24. *Ibid.*, 374.
 25. *Ibid.*, 376.
 26. *Long v. Sapp*, 8 FEP 1075 (1973); *Theodore v. Elmhurst College*, 421 F. Supp. 355 (1976); *Payne v. Travenol Laboratories* 12 FEP 770 (1976); *EEOC v. American Machine and Foundry, Inc.* 13 FEP 1634 (1976). Also see, Missy McDonald, "Corporate Corridors: Black Women, Title VII, and the Politics of Sex Harassment at Work 1974-1980" unpublished paper presented at the Berkshire Conference on History of Women, June (1993).
 27. Regina Austin, "Sapphire Bound!" *Wisconsin Law Review*, No. 3, (1989).
 28. *Ibid.*, 543.
 29. *Ibid.*, 555.
 30. *Ibid.*, 565.
 31. *Ibid.*, 576.
 32. Byllye Avery, "Empowerment Through Wellness," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Fall (1991) 150.
 33. *Ibid.*
 34. *Ibid.*, 151.
 35. *Ibid.*, 150.
 36. Byllye Y. Avery, "Breathing Life into Ourselves: The Evolution of the National Black Women's Health Project," in Evelyn C. White (ed.) *The Black Women's Health Book: Speaking For Ourselves*, (Seattle, Washington: Seal Press, 1990) 10.
 37. Lisa Diane White, Public Relations Coordinator and editor of *Vital Signs*, the magazine published by NBWHP indicated to the author that the paid staff of ten, and approximately twenty volunteers keep the services operational. All the paid employees are from the housing projects.
 38. Angela Davis, "Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: The Politics of Black Women's Health," in Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Culture, Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984, 1990) 54.
 39. *Ibid.*, 55.
 40. Press Release from Dianne Shaw, Director of Communications at the University of North Carolina Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center, "Sisters Helping Sisters – Save Our Sisters Fights Breast Cancer in Our Neighbors," 3.
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 42. Dianna Shaw, "Sisters Helping Sisters," 2.
 43. *Ibid.*, 2.
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 49. *Ibid.*, 14.
 50. Itabari Njeri, "Off the Cuff: A Guide: Urging Submission of Black Women to Black Men is Selling Briskly Despite its Message of Violence," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 July (1990).
 51. bell hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Fall (1991) 8. Also, see Shahrazad Ali, *The Black Man's Guide to Understanding the Black Woman* (1990).
 52. Felly Nkweto Simmonds, "She's Gotta Have It: The Representation on Black Female Sexuality on Film," in Frances Bonner (ed.) *Imagining Women: Cultural Represnetations and Gender* (United Kingdom: Polity Press, 1992) 217.
 53. Chuck Phillips, "N.W.A.'s Dr. Dre Target of Suit by Host of Rap Show," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 July (1991) F3.
 54. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, 1983), xi-xii.: Womanist 1. From Womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious) a black feminist or feminist of color . . . Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious. 2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility . . . and women's strength . . . Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually . . . Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female . . . 3. Loves music. Loves dance . . . Loves struggle. Loves Folk. Loves herself regardless. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.
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 56. I am indebted to Paula Giddings and Beverly Guy-Shaftall for pushing me to think about the difference between Alice Walkers's womanist and Elsa Barkley Brown's womanist analysis.
 57. Elsa Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke," *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Summer (1989) 631.
 58. *Ibid.*, 632.